Free Comic Book Day Reader's Guide

A Man for All Ages

As recently as a half-decade ago, visitors to a comic shop might notice that there were relatively few young readers perusing the racks for the latest issue of their favorite comics—and with good reason. For a large part of the 1980s and the 1990's, it seemed that the all-ages comic book—a book that can be enjoyed equally by children and adults—was a relic of the past, a throwback to older times. In the rush to stake out more sophisticated territory, comics almost abandoned the all-ages market.

Today the situation is quite different, however. Not only are there a number of titles targeted to young and all-ages readers, but many of these all-ages books are finding such an eager audience that they're selling out within weeks or even days of publication.

One publisher who has staked out a claim on the all-ages audience is Alias Comics, masterminded by *Mike S. Miller*. Miller is no newcomer to all-ages books—he's co-writing two all-ages book, ***Lullaby: Wisdom Seeker*** and ***The Imaginaries***, as well as handling some art chores for both titles, which are being published through Image Comics —but he is a relative newcomer to publishing. What makes his line particularly distinctive is its strong emphasis on all-ages material; almost half of his line is accessible to readers young and old.

What convinced Miller to venture into the realm of all-ages books, first at Image and then at Alias? "I had kids," Miller said. "I had kids, several of the people I work with have kids, and you know, there just isn't a whole lot out there that we felt comfortable showing or reading to our kids. I *love* comic books... have since I was a kid, back when almost *all* comics were viably all-ages comics. I came into comics when *Paul Smith* was drawing ***X-Men***, and *John Byrne* was on ***Alpha Flight***, *Walt Simonson* was on ***Thor***... now *that* was a golden age to be a kid reading comics!...

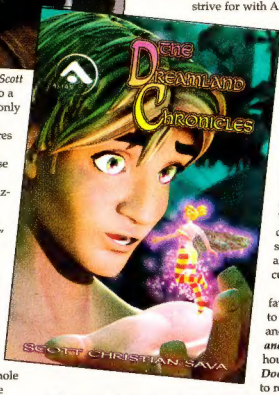
"I want to bring comics to the market that make my kids fall in love with comics the way I did. The way ***Avengers, Batman, X-men***...almost every major title out there now—is, my kids won't be reading those for a good long time. Not *just* because of the violence and sexual innuendo, but because they can't *relate*. And in the long run, who is going to pay for that? The comic book direct market as a whole, that's who. Without a next generation of readers, this market will shrivel up and die, or move on to the bookstore-only market with manga and graphic novels for adults."

To counter that, Miller was determined to offer a variety of titles that young readers and older readers could enjoy equally. It was important to him that the titles be accessible to young readers, but he didn't want books that seemed "dumbed down" so that older readers couldn't enjoy them. And it appeared that he knew what he was doing; his first offering was ***Lions, Tigers, & Bears***, an all-ages book by *Mike Bullock & Jack Lawrence* that Miller hand-picked to produce through Alias. The first issue sold out within days of release. Then came ***Lullaby—Wisdom Seeker***, which also sold out; and ***The Imaginaries***, which did the same. And now Miller's Alias Enterprises has an entire line of comics coming out—a line that stresses all ages books as a vital part of its overall publishing plan.

Miller offered a run-down of the all-ages projects that Alias is involved with:

- ***The Imaginaries*** - "What happens to your imaginary friends when you grow up? A child's faith is a powerful thing. It gives life to his imagination, and that imagination can even take on a life of its own. But what happens to the imaginary friends, the childhood superheroes, the playmates and stuffed animals when the children who gave them life no longer believe in them? They go to the Imagined Nation. Join Superhero G as he explores this strange new world, full of the imaginings of billions of children around the world. Follow him as he meets strange and wonderful characters, the kind only a child could believe in, and discovers a new purpose for his existence unbound by the imaginings of his creator, and free to become more than even he has ever imagined before."
- ***Lullaby—Wisdom Seeker*** - "An all-ages romp through the fantasy worlds of children's fiction. This wonderful story focuses on the beloved characters of childhood yore... Join Jim Hawkins, Alice (From Wonderland), Pinocchio, Little Red Riding Hood, and the Pied Piper as they join forces to stop a dark magic that has been warping this wonderful world into it's own image, and discover who is behind the unleashing of this darkness. You'll never guess who the bad guy turns out to be in this fun filled adventure!"
- ***Lions, Tigers and Bears*** "Joey's world is turned upside down when his mother accepts a job in a neighboring town, forcing him to move away from his friends and his loving Grandmother. But just before the moving van is ready to pull out, Grandma brings him a special gift: four new stuffed animals—a lion, two tigers and a panther - known as The Night Pride. Joey is convinced his Grandmother's stories of The Night Pride having magic powers are just that: stories. But he's about to find out his new friends are more real and more needed—than he could have imagined, especially when the Beasties come creeping out of a dark closet to get him."
- ***Pakkins' Land*** - "A series of strange events brings Paul to a fantastic world called 'Pakkins' Land.'. There he meets a mysterious giant Eagle of light who gives him a feather as a token of friendship. At the touch of this feather Paul feels something magical, and as the Eagle mysteriously vanishes, Paul realizes that he is lost in this new world. Soon Paul is befriended by a pair of extraordinary talking animals, who set off together to find the long lost King Aryah, and try to return Paul to his own land. The pathway is not without danger. Sure to appeal to all who enjoy the works of ***C.S. Lewis, L. Frank Baum, and J.R.R. Tolkien***."
- ***David*** - : "From the accounts of the First Book of Samuel, ***David*** begins the retelling of the most powerful General of Israel. Anointed as a young boy and mocked by his brothers and family, young David is even hunted by the king himself. While hiding in a wilderness cave, David looks back on the fateful day he was anointed by a prophet, realizing he's been fighting a battle even from his youth in his father's sheepfold."
- ***David's Mighty Men***: "Join King David and his mighty men in this whimsical but reverent retelling of some of the Bibles greatest heroes. Two complete stories in one sixty-four page graphic novel.".
- ***Opposite Forces*** - "Fresh from his work with Big Ideas' ***VeggieTales*** and ***Larry-Boy*** episodes, animator and director *Tom Bancroft* turns his attention to comics and the antics of a pair of mismatched rookie superheroes in Opposite Forces."

- ***Dreamland Chronicles*** - *Scott Christian Sava* takes us into a world where dreams not only come true... they *are* true! Join our hero as he explores the world of Dreamland and finds the true purpose of his life. ***Dreamland Chronicles*** is told in amazing fully rendered 3D CGI, a sure-fire hit with the younger generation!"
- ***ArmorQuest*** - "The story of a young boy, Timothy, who finds his life and the life of his village threatened by dragons. His village is rescued by Sol, a Knight of the Way, but at what cost? 'Therefore, take the whole armor that you may be able to withstand in the evil day...'"



Miller is confident that the early sellout status of ***Lullaby, Imaginaries***, and ***Lions, Tigers & Bears*** is indicative of a continuing change in the comic book marketplace—a change that recognizes the importance of younger readers. "It tells me that we were right on target with this All-ages push. This article is coming out on FCBD, but chances are *all* our titles will be sold out by the time your readers see this article! Retailers across the country have reported nearly *instant* sell-outs of all three of our titles. There was such a vacuum in the comic market for age-appropriate material that they simply vanished from shelves everywhere. But luckily for those who haven't gotten their copies yet, the collected editions will be available this summer.

"If it were just one of them, maybe it would be a fluke; if it were two, maybe we got lucky; but *all three* had similar sell-through. Does that mean the market is changing? Yes. Most of the market is in their thirties or older now, and most of us have kids! As we get our kids into comics with books like those I mentioned above, those kids are going to want more titles they can relate to. There is a revolution coming, and Alias comics is leading the charge!"

Does Miller have any theories as to why all-ages non-superhero books are doing so well—and why it took comics so long to rediscover the appeal of non-superhero series? "That's a tough question. If I had to guess, I would think that when most comic readers look at the 'kid-friendly' versions of ***Batman, Teen Titans, Superman, Spider-Man, Fantastic Four***, etc. They see a 'dumbed down' version of books they already buy. I tried reading some of those, and while my kids might like them, they didn't have what it takes to hold an adult's attention. So that wouldn't really count as 'all ages', but more just as 'kids comics.' Well, as a parent and a comics fan, I want more than that from an all-ages book. I want the intelligent stories I grew up with that were still age-appropriate for children. That's what we strive for with Alias, and all of our all-ages titles thus far have been sell-out success stories. I think that's a testament to how we've managed to hit that mark."

Miller isn't resting on his laurels; he's already looking past his first wave of all-ages books and has more all-ages projects in development, "including ***The Gimoles*** from *Mike Bullock*, the creator of ***Lions, Tigers and Bears***; ***Kid Kosmic*** from *Scott Kinney*, the creator of ***Killer Stunts, Inc.***; ***Valkyries*** from *Kevin Grevioux*, co-creator of ***Underworld***—and several by me and others that aren't far enough along to discuss... yet!"

Miller has some all-ages favorites of his own—in addition to the books that he publishes and/or edits, of course! "***Herobear and the Kid*** is a favorite in our house. My kids also love ***Scooby-Doo***, and occasionally even want me to read them an ***Archie Digest***," Miller said. "Other than that, comics like ***Calvin and Hobbes*** and ***Bloom County*** collections are the all-ages titles that are the biggest hits with me, personally."

BY CLIFF BIGGERS

Courtesy your friendly neighborhood comics outlet!

CSN FCBD Reader's Guide

Comics' Best
And Most Reader-Friendly

To offer some guidance to new readers who have rediscovered comics thanks to Free Comic Book Day—and to veteran readers who are looking for new titles to add to their "must-read" lists—*Comic Shop News* has compiled a series of Top 10 lists spotlighting the ten best and most reader-friendly books on the stands today. The comics field offers hundreds of high-quality books, of course—but many of those books are rather inaccessible to new readers, due to complex storylines, longrunning subplots, and the lack of a clearly discernible starting point. What we were looking for with this issue, though, were the ten best and most accessible works for those looking to expand their comic-reading horizons. We've broken the lists into the following categories

- **Comic Books (Periodicals)**
- **All-Ages Comic Books (Periodicals)**
- **Superhero Graphic Novels**
- **Non-superhero Graphic Novels**
- **Classic Reprint Collections**
- **Manga**

Following *CSN's* recommendations are the top five recommendations from a survey group of comic book professionals, and the top five recommendations of a survey group of *CSN's* own readership.

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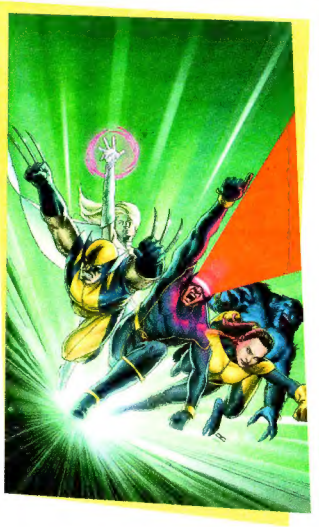
CSN's Top 10 for FCBD

1. ***Superman/Batman*** - Two of the field's most iconic characters, fascinating and unpredictable storylines, and an emphasis on big events that go heavy on the sense of wonder—writer *Jeph Loeb* ensures that each issue offers everything that got us into comics to begin with.



2. ***Astonishing X-Men*** - These are the X-Men that readers have come to know over the decades—and you don't have to be a walking encyclopedia of comic book continuity to follow what's going on. *Joss Whedon & John Cassaday* deliver a book that's engaging, exciting, and totally reader-friendly.

3. ***Ultimate Spider-Man*** - If you're looking to recapture the thrills you discovered in the two *Spider-Man* films, this is the book for you. Spidey's still in school, he's involved in an up-and-down relationship with Mary Jane, he's still cocky about his abilities... it's the quintessential teen-hero book, prepared to perfection by *Brian Bendis & Mark Bagley.*

4. ***Conan*** - *Robert E. Howard's* Cimmerian barbarian is wielding a broadsword once again, thanks to *Kurt Busiek, Cary Nord, & Tom Yeates.* It's Busiek's thoughtful appreciation of REH's savage hero that gives this book its spark: not only is he intent on delivering a great story, he's also determined to deliver a story that would meet with Howard's approval if he were still around.

5. ***Uncle Scrooge Adventures*** - Each issue offers a mix of classic Scrooge stories by the Duck-master, *Carl Barks*, along with short tales never before seen in America. The timeless nature of the Disney characters is always in evidence here, but it's the sense of adventure that Barks brings to Scrooge, Donald, and the rest of the Duck family that makes this a standout title.

6. ***The Walking Dead*** - *Robert Kirkman* takes an overused horror concept—the isolated island of humanity in a zombified world—and breathes new life into it.

The horrifying nature of the undead zombies is made even more real by the believable human element that Kirkman brings to his beleaguered living cast in this mature-readers sophisticated horror tale.

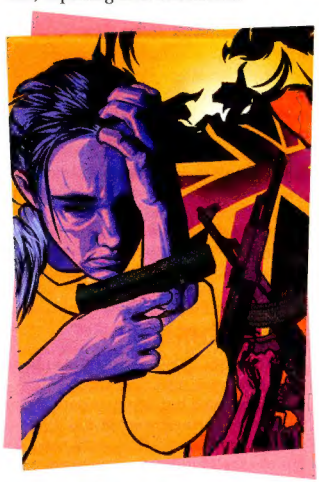
7 ***Y—The Last Man*** - *Brian K. Vaughan & Pia Guerra's* story of the only man to survive a virus that killed every living being with a Y chromosome avoids the sex-farce clichés, delivering one of the most thought-provoking bits of speculative fiction in comics. How does the world change when there are no men? How do the surviving women adapt to fill the occupational void? How does society change? Government? And what caused this devastating change? The questions are thought-provoking, and the answers, as Vaughan & Guerra deliver them, are positively fascinating.

8. ***Identity Crisis*** - The seven-issue maxiseries wrapped its run in late 2004, but DC has just released seven ***Identity Crisis Final Printings*** to hold readers over until the collected edition appears this fall. This compelling murder mystery begins with the death of a member of the JLA's extended family; as the heroes embark on a quest to find the killer, they uncover some pretty disturbing secrets about themselves... secrets that rock the alliance of superheroes to its core. Best-selling writer *Brad Meltzer*

shakes the superhero world to its core with this series—but it wouldn't have worked half as well without the evocative, detailed art of *Rags Morales & Michael Bair.* (And if you want to see where the story goes next, you can continue with ***DC Countdown to Infinite Crisis,*** which in turn spreads into four limited series: ***The OMAC Project, Day of Vengeance, Villains United,*** and ***The Rann/Thanagar War.)***

9. ***Strangers in Paradise*** - *Terry Moore* has accomplished something almost unprecedented in comics: he's created believable characters so real, so complex, and so unpredictable that, by the time you've read a few issues of the series, you feel like you actually *know* them. This far-reaching tale of two women on a quest for happiness blends humor, drama, pathos, and adventure in a manner unlike any other comic on the stands today.

10. ***Queen & Country*** - Want to see what the world of espionage is really like? Forget those James Bond fantasies—*Greg Rucka* offers you an inside peek into the *real* spy deal with this edgy, suspenseful series focusing on SIS operative Tara Chace, whose adventures are far more rooted in contemporary global politics than James Bond's cinematic extravagances. Rucka complements the core ***Queen & Country*** series with a spinoff, ***Queen & Country: Declassified,*** that focuses on the core book's supporting cast, exploring their backstories.



Pro Picks

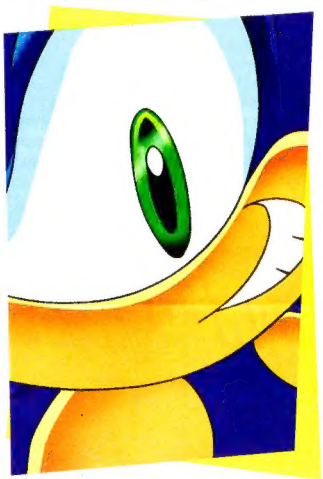
1. ***Astonishing X-Men***
2. ***JSA*** - "Geoff Johns doesn't miss a beat. His story arcs are engaging, his characterization flawless. He gives a nod to the team's rich history without ever being bogged down in miscellanea. This is what super-hero comics should and could *be."—Jim Valentino,* creator of ***ShadowHawk, A Touch of Silver,*** and former publisher of Image Comics
3. ***Fables***
4. ***Supreme Power***
5. ***Powers***

Reader Picks

1. ***Ultimate Spider-Man***
2. ***Astonishing X-Men***
3. ***Conan***
4. ***Superman/Batman***
5. ***New Avengers***

Top 10 All-Ages Comics

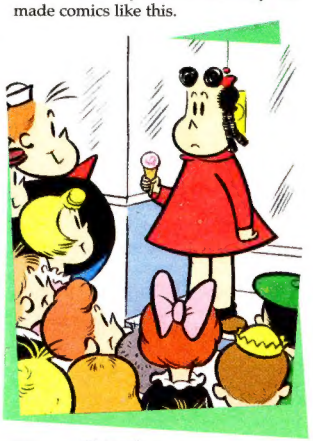
1. ***Sonic the Hedgehog*** - The virtual granddaddy of the all-ages market, ***Sonic*** has been at the top of the heap for more than a decade now. Without a doubt the most accessible of all videogame-inspired comics, ***Sonic*** has tremendous young-reader appeal and one of the most dedicated audiences of any comic. (There are a couple of trade paperbacks available as well, in case the monthly comic isn't enough for you!)



2. ***The Simpsons*** -*Matt Groening* didn't license his hit animated series out to a third-party publisher; instead, he chose to start his *own* publishing company, Bongo Comics, to make sure that the comic captures the same irreverently charming tone that has kept this series at the top of Fox-TV's ratings charts for oh-so-many years. (Early issues are available in the ***Simpsons Classics*** magazine and in a number of trade paperbacks.)
3. ***Archie*** - Let's face it, you can't go wrong with *any* Archie title. The Riverdale Gang is almost instantly familiar, the archetypal high school-kid cast has a sort of comic-strip feel that's accessible parents and children alike, and there's a timeless quality to the stories that makes nostalgic parents feel comfortable introducing the comic to the next generation of readers. (There are several trade paperback compilations and a whole line of monthly digests, but parents are sure to find the "decades" series of trades—***Archie in the Forties, the Fifties,*** etc.—irresistible.)

4. ***Teen Titans Go!*** - Like the current animated series, love the comic book! While the DC ***Teen Titans*** monthly features an older line-up and more serious stories, ***Teen Titans Go!*** stars the same short-stuff team that kids see on the little screen all the time. (The first ten issues are available in two bargain-priced digests.)
5. ***Sabrina*** - While the core Archie books remain comfortably familiar year after year, Archie decided to take a bolder approach with ***Sabrina***: they brought in a new talent, *Tanya del Rio,* to reinterpret the comic in a contemporary manga style. The new ***Sabrina*** plays up real-world characterization, mixing it with the magical elements that readers expect from a comic that stars a teenage witch.
6. ***Spider-Girl*** - When Marvel wanted to create a near-future version of the familiar Marvel Universe, they went to former editor-in-chief *Tom DeFalco,* whose unbridled enthusiasm for accessible, wholesome superhero comics is second only to *Stan Lee's.* Set about sixteen years in the future, ***Spider-Girl*** stars the teenage daughter of Peter Parker and Mary Jane; she's inherited her father's spider-abilities, and carries on his heroic tradition for a new generation. Look for lots of next-generation characters to make appearances in here. (Three digest collections of early issues are available.)
7. ***Lions, Tigers, & Bears*** - Inspired in part by the brilliant but currently unavailable ***Herobear & the Kid,*** this series stars a young boy who discovers that the stuffed animals his grandmother gave him come to life at night—and that's a good thing, since he needs their help to overcome the Beasties who dwell in his dark closet. *Mike Bullock & Jack Lawrence* tap into several archetypal childhood elements for this wondrous adventure.
8. ***Hardy Boys*** - NBM revamps the classic detective-brothers series for the 21st century in these fast-paced, instantly appealing mystery tales done in a light manga style. The classic Hardy Boys elements are here, but the modern look is much better than nostalgia for attracting new readers. (One digest out so far, with new volumes appearing quarterly; NBM also offers a companion series, ***Nancy Drew,*** that's just as cleverly done—and it has the same light-manga visual style that young readers find so inviting.)
9. ***Scooby-Doo*** - Ruh-Ro... Thought we were going to forget the doggie detective and his gang, didn't you? Forty years of cartoons and a couple of big-budget films make Scooby, Shaggy, and the gang instantly recognizable to grandparents, parents, and kids—and the comic book stories are frequently more engaging than the original cartoons! (Two digests reprinting early ***Scooby*** stories are also available.)

10. ***Little Lulu***- It's no wonder that Lulu has become a female icon—she's independent, resourceful, bold, adventurous, and not above helping her bumbling friend Tubby when he gets in over his head. These stories by *John Stanley & Irving Tripp,* which present Lulu at her best, will make you wish that they still made comics like this.



Pro Picks

1. ***Little Lulu***
2. ***Asterix***
3. ***The Simpsons***
4. ***Uncle Scrooge Adventures***
5. ***Leave It To Chance***

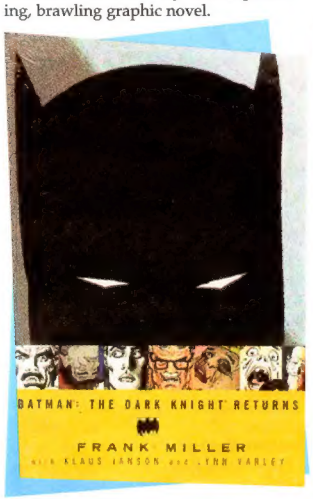
Reader Picks

1. ***The Simpsons***
2. ***Spider-Girl***
3. ***Lions, Tigers, & Bears***
4. ***Teen Titans Go!***
5. ***The Imaginaries***

Top 10 Superhero Graphic Novels

1. ***Watchmen*** - What begins as a murder mystery becomes something much more, thanks to the genius of creators *Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons*. Like Kurosawa's ***Rashomon, Watchmen*** uses the mystery as a means to explore human—or in this case, superhuman—nature. This graphic novel, with its exploration of the dichotomy of superbeings who both uphold the law and transcend it, is essential reading for anyone interested in the concept of superheroes.

2. ***The Dark Knight Returns*** - *Frank Miller* redefines Batman with this graphic novel focusing an older Dark Knight who returns to action when his world needs him most. But is there room in this all-too-gray world for Batman's black-and-white morality? The climactic final battle between Batman and Superman is worth the admission price by itself. Readers will see early hints of the ultraviolent ***Sin City*** in this sprawling, brawling graphic novel.



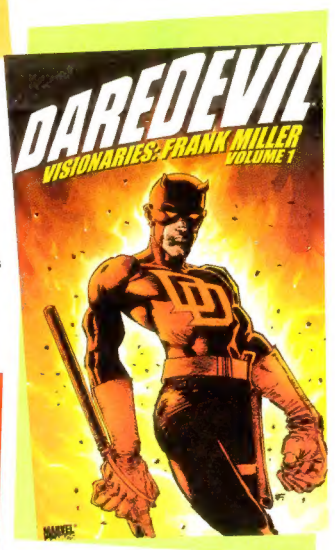
3. ***Crisis on Infinite Earths*** - What do you do when your comic book world has become too complicated? You can just toss continuity out the window, like all too many companies have done in recent years—or you can bring in *Marv Wolfman & George Perez* to destroy the entire comic book universe and reinvent it for a new generation of readers. This series, the ultimate cosmic saga, features the death of two of the most beloved characters in the DC Universe; the ramifications of ***Crisis*** still resonate in the DC Universe twenty years later.

4. ***Kingdom Come*** - The contrasting values of the classic superheroes and the next generation of superbeings is at the center of this graphic novel that manages to be both grandly mythic and intensely personal at the same time. *Mark Waid & Alex Ross* define the essence of superheroism in this fully painted saga that offers a look at today's heroes in the sunset of their lives, often haunted by the events of prior years. Whaddaya know—with great power *does* come great responsibility!...

5. ***Marvels*** - This is the project that put *Alex Ross* on the map artistically. Written by *Kurt Busiek*, ***Marvels*** offers a human's-eye view of the birth of the age of Marvel superheroes. The human in question is Phil Sheldon, a news photographer for the ***Daily Bugle;*** he becomes our eyes into a normal world reshaped forever by a veritable explosion of superbeings. Superhero comics traditionally make the superhuman seem normal and everyday; ***Marvels*** restores the sense of wonder that is all too frequently missing from superhero drama.

6. ***Batman: Hush*** (2 vols) - The quintessential Batman adventure, courtesy of *Jeph Loeb & Jim Lee*. This back-to-the-basics tale pits Batman and the rest of his extended Bat-family against virtually every major villain from Batman's Rogues' Gallery. The catalyst for the conflict is the mystery villain Hush, who seems to know all of Batman's secrets... and is willing to use his knowledge to defeat the Dark Knight.

7. ***X-Men: Days of Future Past*** - Set in a dystopian future controlled by the sentinels, this superhuman-mutants-versus-technology-gone-wild tale by *Chris Claremont & John Byrne* is a precursor to the Wachowski Brothers' ***Matrix*** films, minus the religious trappings. (You might have noticed that, like many other books on this list, this is an alternate-reality storyline. There's a reason for that: the alternate-reality allows creators to break free of the limitations of current continuity to explore broader themes in a more imaginative setting.)



9. ***Daredevil Visionaries: Frank Miller*** (3 vols) - *Frank Miller* made his reputation with his breakthrough work on ***Daredevil,*** one of Marvel's more minor superhero titles until Miller shook up everything. Within a few issues of coming on board as artist, Miller had taken over the writing honors as well, transforming ***Daredevil*** into an epic good-versus-evil story pitting Daredevil against the Kingpin and Bullseye—but it's the introduction of Daredevil's doomed love Elektra that changes the hero's world forever.

10. ***Superman: Secret Identity*** - *Kurt Busiek & Stuart Immonen* tell the story of a teenager named Clark Kent... but it's not the story you might expect. *This* Clark Kent, who lives in a world in which Superman is a comic book hero, has spent most of his life being ribbed about his name—but everything changes when Clark discovers that he does indeed possess powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary men. How Clark deals with his newfound powers is at the center of this fascinating story set in a world remarkably similar to our own.

6. ***Invincible Volume One*** - *Robert Kirkman & Cory Walker* introduce the teenaged son of one of the world's most famous superheroes. Mark Grayson's normal teenage life is about to be shaken up a bit, though, because he's starting to develop some of his father's superpowers... and while that seems good, there are some rather unique problems that go along with the whole superhero thing. Like ***The Incredibles,*** this graphic novel offers an insightful and entertaining look inside a superhero family.

Pro Picks

1. ***Watchmen*** - "This series still stands as one of the great comic-book stories, widely imitated but never surpassed. Alan Moore's riveting script and Dave Gibbon's perfect visuals should make this top shelf for not just 'superhero' fans, but any serious comics fan." — *Mark Verheiden*, ***Superman*** writer and former ***Smallville*** co-executive producer and scriptwriter

2. ***The Dark Knight Returns***

3. ***Crisis on Infinite Earths*** - "One of the great series of the '80s with great work by *Marv Wolfman and George Perez*, and important prep reading for this fall's ***Infinite Crisis*** limited series."—DC President & Publisher *Paul Levitz*

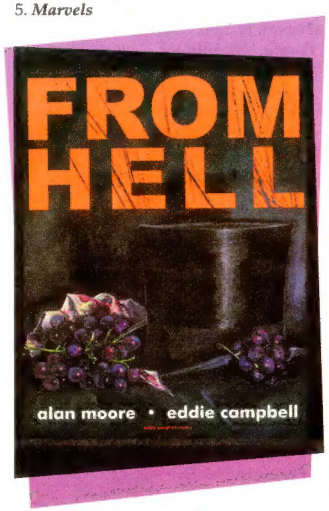
4. ***Batman: The Killing Joke***

5. ***The Ultimates Volume One HC*** - "An imaginative retelling of the Avengers, The Ultimates' origin and subsequent

first missions are a delight. Stunning artwork by *Bryan Hitch* and some very clever dialogue from *Mark Millar* make this as accessible as it is topical. Sure, some will find it a little talky, but when the action breaks out, it's more than worth the price of admission."
—*Jeph Loeb*, writer of ***Superman/Batman*** and ***Batman: Hush***

Reader Picks

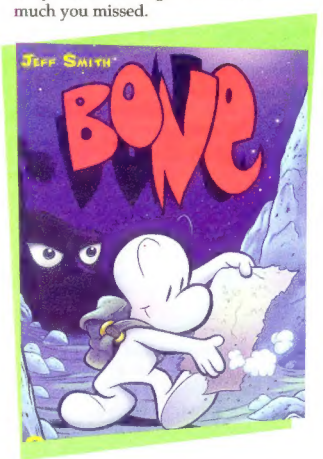
1. ***The Dark Knight Returns***
2. ***Watchmen***
3. ***Kingdom Come***
4. ***Crisis on Infinite Earths***
5. ***Marvels***



Top 10 Non-Superhero Comics

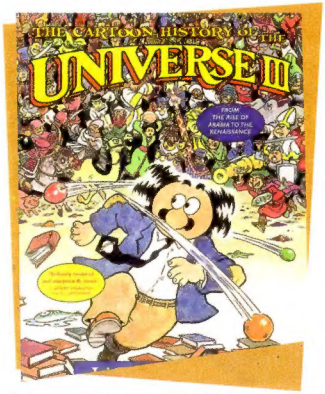
1. ***From Hell*** - *Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell* present one of the most provocative Jack the Ripper dramas ever created in *any* medium. Forget the lackluster film that stripped away all the life from Moore & Campbell's tale; the graphic novel is filled with conjectures, conspiracies, and complexities almost unparalleled in comics. And don't skip the endnotes—they're almost as fascinating as the graphic novel itself! (How often do you hear someone say *that* about a graphic novel?)
2. ***Blankets*** - *Craig Thompson* takes the phrase "graphic novel" very seriously, creating a massive novel-length, intensely personal tale of love (both romantic and brotherly) and faith. This coming of age drama is distinctive in both its size and its artistic accomplishment.
3. ***Sandman Vol 3: Dream Country*** - You can't go wrong with any collection of *Neil Gaiman's* superb ***Sandman***, but this one stands out thanks to two remarkable stories: "Dream of a Thousand Cats," a tale both touching and disturbing in its vision of a cat's dreams; and "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which reveals just where Shakespeare came up with those remarkable plays. (And after you read the latter, you might want to take a look at the final story from ***Sandman Volume 10***, which offers a poignant glimpse at Shakespeare's final days.) Gaiman taps into the mythic with his tales of the Endless and their control of our lives... and our deaths.

4. ***League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*** - The ultimate literary adventure, this far-reaching melodrama by *Alan Moore & Kevin O'Neill* brings together the Invisible Man, Dr. Jekyll, Mina Harker, Captain Nemo, and Alan Quartermain, united as a sort of literary Justice League for a globe-spanning adventure positively packed with allusions to Victorian literature, popular fiction, and cultural icons. Read this one the first time for the story, then read it again to see how much you missed.



5. ***Bone One Volume Edition*** - The entire run of *Jeff Smith's* epic anthropomorphic fantasy is compiled in this doorstop of a book. Smith paved the way for contemporary all-ages fantasy with this Tolkienesque quest-saga.
6. ***Locas: A Love & Rockets Book*** - This tempestuous tale of a woman's coming of age is actually a compilation of every Maggie Chascarrillo story done by *Jaime Hernandez* in the twenty-plus year run of ***Love and Rockets***. Individually, these stories are vibrant, imaginative, real-world tales of one woman's search for purpose and satisfaction in a life that offers very little of either.

7. ***Ministry of Space*** - *Warren Ellis & Chris Weston* deliver a remarkable look into an alternate reality in which England has become the dominant space power. Remarkably, Ellis manages to tell this panoramic tale while keeping an intensely personal focus on John Dashwood, the man whose drive to take England into space is central to the story. It's an inspirational saga, filled with hope and a Heinleinesque appreciation of human ambition and achievement.



8. ***Cartoon History of the Universe*** - *Larry Gonick's* wry, irreverent approach to history is absolutely addictive—and wholly educational! While he relies on silliness and sarcasm to entertain, he always remains true to history—and to support his take on events, he offers a full bibliography at the end of each volume. The layman with a casual knowledge of history is going to be captivated by this, but there's enough information here to intrigue even the most schooled historian.
9. ***Maus—A Survivor's Tale*** - *Art Spiegleman's* Pulitzer-prize-winning anthropomorphic allegory is perhaps the most powerful tale of survival and suffering ever presented in comic book form. This graphic novel recasts the Holocaust as a grim struggle between oppressed mice and controlling cats—but it's more than just a war story, as it's also the story of a son struggling to connect with a father who was a Holocaust survivor. It's an amazing work, complex and moving.
10. ***Sin City: The Hard Goodbye*** - *Frank Miller* out-noirs *Mickey Spillane* in this ultra-violent hardboiled tale of right and wrong, all done in appropriately stark black and white. The recently-released film combines three Miller ***Sin City*** graphic novels into one visual narrative, but this volume allows you to enjoy the story of Marv's personal war and sacrifice without the distraction of concurrent plotlines. Fast-paced, grim, and brutal, ***The Hard Goodbye*** is as noir as it gets.

Pro Picks

1. ***Love & Rockets*** (assorted volumes)
2. ***From Hell***
3. ***Sandman*** (assorted volumes)
4. ***Preacher*** (assorted volumes)
5. ***Transmetropolitan*** (assorted volumes)

Reader Picks

1. ***League of Extraordinary Gentlemen***
2. ***Sandman*** (assorted volumes)
3. ***Sin City*** (assorted volumes)
4. ***Y—The Last Man*** (assorted volumes)
5. ***Transmetropolitan*** (assorted volumes)

Top 10 Classic Reprints

1. ***Spirit Volume Eleven*** - There are no bad volumes of this *Will Eisner* classic, but ***Volume Eleven*** is the first Eisner-produced volume after he returned home from WWII. In its pages, readers will see what happens when artistic genius, pent up for years, is allowed to run free. The strip blossoms from a cleverly done, well-illustrated adventure strip to the sort of full-bore human interest storytelling that Eisner is famous for.

2. ***Green Lantern/Green Arrow Volume One*** - *Denny O'Neil & Neal Adams* gave superheroes a social conscience with this innovative revamping of two down-on-their-luck DC heroes. Freed to push boundaries that would have been off-limits for a better-selling comic, O'Neil & Adams made ***Green Lantern/Green Arrow*** the forerunner of a social-relevance movement in comics that continues to this day.

3. ***Marvel Masterworks: Amazing Spider-Man Volume Two***- From the very beginning, *Stan Lee & Steve Ditko* made Spider-Man a distinctively different superhero—angst-driven, socially frustrated, guilt-ridden, and overwhelmed by responsibility, Peter Parker struggled to find balance in his life. This volume, though, is Lee & Ditko at their best; there isn't a bad story in the bunch, and many of the most important villains in Spidey history are present in these tales, including the unforgettable Sinister Six battle from ***Amazing Spider-Man Annual #1.***

4. ***Flash Archives Vol Three*** - Comic book history is made in this landmark collection that contains "Flash of Two Worlds," the first story to bridge the gap between the Golden Age and the Silver Age. All the twists and turns of comic book continuity are born in this remarkable tale. Every story is energetic, tight, and plot-driven, and *Carmine Infantino's* Flash conveys a visual elegance that no artist since then has been able to duplicate.

5. ***T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents Volume One*** - Energized by the success of Marvel's bold reinvention of the superhero field, *Wally Wood* and a band of top talents from both Marvel and DC (including ***Amazing Spider-Man's*** *Steve Ditko* and ***Justice League of America's*** *Mike Sekowsky)* create a new comic book world that blends the vitality of Marvel's books with the superspies-at-war angle of James Bond and ***The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*** And because it's all being built from the ground up right here, there's no backstory to confuse newcomers.

6. ***Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four Volume Five*** - This volume includes FF stories from the most inventive period in *Stan Lee & Jack Kirby* history. The Inhumans, Galactus, and the Silver Surfer all make their first appearances in these stories that convey the awe and grandeur of the world in which the Fantastic Four operate, while ***FF Annual #3's*** wedding of Reed & Sue reminds us that in spite of it all, these characters remain remarkably human.

7. ***Complete Peanuts Volume One***- This hardcover volume collects the first two years' worth of *Charles Shulz's* classic comic strip—including many strips that haven't seen print since the day they appeared in the funny pages some fifty years ago. Rediscover the charm of Charlie Brown and his friends from the very beginning, and you'll see why ***Peanuts*** redefined the comic strip.

8. ***Conan Chronicles Volume Four*** - From the very first issue of ***Conan***, it was evident that *Barry Windsor-Smith* was a talent to be reckoned with—but in this collection of Smith's final issues, his full artistic genius is in evidence. Who else would have attempted to bring the Pre-Raphaelite movement to adventure comics? And adventure fans won't find a storyteller more faithful to *Robert E. Howard's* vision of Conan than *Roy Thomas*, who offers both original stories and adaptations in this collection. Highlights include the first appearance of Red Sonja and the ultimate Conan tale, "Red Nails."

9. ***Elfquest Archives Volume One*** - *Wendy & Richard Pini* take the fantasy road less travelled—their ***Elfquest*** avoids the trappings of Tolkienesque grand fantasy and the barbaric swordplay of Howard's Conan. Instead, the Pinis have created a fantasy milieu all their own, a culture rich and imaginative and instantly appealing.

10. ***Adventures of Little Archie Volume One*** - *Bob Bolling's* tales of Archie when he was a boy are far from Archie's typical teen sitcom misadventures. These charming stories, which blend humor, drama, and adventure, convey the sense of wonder of childhood while fleshing out the personalities of Archie, Betty, Veronica, and the rest of the Riverdale gang.

Pro Picks

1. ***Spirit Archives*** (various volumes) - "Just discovered they were being published and have only gotten up to volume five. But what an opportunity! To watch the progression of what is, arguably, the finest storyteller in comics ever! Amazing! Plus I believe this is the first time most of these stories have been available since they were first published. Hats off to DC Comics for printing these books without editing them for politically correct values... These stories are marvelous little time capsules. Must reading for anyone with ambitions to become *any* kind of comic book professional." — *Jim Starlin*, writer/artist of ***Dreadstar, Thanos, Metamorphosis Odyssey, Cosmic Kid, Warlock, Captain Marvel,*** and much, much more
2. ***Green Lantern/Green Arrow***
3. ***Green Lantern Archives Volume One***
4. ***Avengers: Kree/Skrull War***
5. ***Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four Volume One***

Reader Picks

1. ***Marvel Masterworks: Amazing Spider-Man*** (assorted volumes)
2. ***Green Lantern/Green Arrow***
3. ***Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four*** (assorted volumes)
4. ***Spirit Archives*** (assorted volumes)
5. ***Justice League of America Archives*** (assorted volumes)

Top 10 Manga

1. ***Lone Wolf & Cub*** - *Kazuo Koike & Goseki Kojima* are the masterminds behind the greatest manga series of them all, a sprawling epic starring a vengeful ronin and his young son as he embarks on a quest for vengeance and a parental quest for a better life for his infant child. If it seems familiar, there could be good reason: ***The Road to Perdition*** is inspired by this historical saga.

2. ***Ranma 1/2*** - *Rumiko Takahashi's* comic farce focuses on a young man whose dunk in a cursed spring has major after-effects: any time he's splashed with cold water, he turns into a young girl, and he's stuck that way until a dash of hot water changes him back. ***Ranma 1/2*** is funny, fast-paced, sometimes absurd, but always entertaining.

3. ***Akira*** - The best science-fiction manga ever, *Katsuhiro Otomo's* ***Akira,*** set in a post-WWIII Neo-Tokyo, involves biker gangs, secret government psychic research programs, and a young boy who is transformed into the most powerful—and potentially deadly—being on earth. Otomo brings a dark, foreboding tone to the story that is almost unrelenting, propelling the saga forward to its horrifying conclusion.

4. ***Love Hina*** - Here's a clever, lighthearted human interest story that sounds tailor-made for a hit television sitcom: a young man who can't get into the college of his dreams—but he can get a job as the manager for the Hinata Apartments, an all-girls dorm. Naturally, hijinks and misadventures ensue—but they're totally charming, involving one of the most likeable casts of characters you'll ever meet.

5. ***Battle Royale - Survivor*** meets ***The Most Dangerous Game*** in this brutal, shocking, boundaries-pushing series of a group of students forced to battle one another to the death in the most extreme "last-man-standing" competition comics have ever seen. This harsh, no-holds-barred series is strictly for mature readers—and it pays off with mature content, complex psychological elements, and thought-provoking insights into human nature at its best... and worst.

6. ***Barefoot Gen*** - A truly unforgettable work, this is *Keiji Nakazawa's* first-hand tale of the Hiroshima bombing. This isn't a heavy political treatise or a sensationalistic shocker; instead, it's a first-hand retelling of one survivor's experiences before and after the bombing, capturing the indomitable human spirit on the comic book page in a way that virtually no other work ever has... or likely ever will...

7. ***Maison Ikkoku*** - Who'd have thought that apartment life could inspire so many delightful tales? Where ***Love Hina*** is a bit more a comedy of situation, ***Maison Ikkoku*** is a comedy of characterization. This apartment-house-as-microcosm series by *Rumiko Takahashi* focuses on the residents of rundown apartment house Maison Ikkoku. The blossoming romance between failed college student Godai and the recently widowed apartment manager Kyoko is the focal point of this light romance.

8. ***Iron Wok Jan*** - Think ***Iron Chef,*** manga-style! Jan is a skilled chef whose cleverness keeps him at the top of his career—but like a veteran gunslinger in those old Westerns, Jan is the target of every young gun who wants to make a culinary name for himself. *Shinji Saijyo* has cooked up a recipe for fun, and he serves it in heaping helpings.

9. ***Ghost in the Shell*** - A complex cyberpunk tale by *Masamune Shirow*, this story is driven by its captivating visual style. The the haunting and suspenseful cat-and-mouse story focuses on a cybernetically enhanced agent on the trail of a data thief who seems to be just as keenly interested in the agent as she is in him. The multi-layered story is mature in theme and content, but it delivers in a way that all too few cyberpunk-themed comics ever do.

10. ***Osamu Tezuka's Buddha*** - The creator of ***Astro Boy*** tells the story of Buddha's life—but it's not a dry fact-heavy biography. Instead, he brings Buddha to life in a lively, inviting manner. The subject matter may be mythic, but Tezuka discovers the man within, and that's what makes this multi-volume biography so distinctive.

Pro Picks

1. *Lone Wolf & Cub*
2. *Akira*
3. *Fushigi Yugi*
4. *Osamu Tezuka's Buddha*
5. *Hikaro No Go*

Reader Picks

1. *Lone Wolf & Cub*
2. *Ghost in the Shell*
3. *Ranma 1/2*
4. *Oh My Goddess!*
5. *Bleach*

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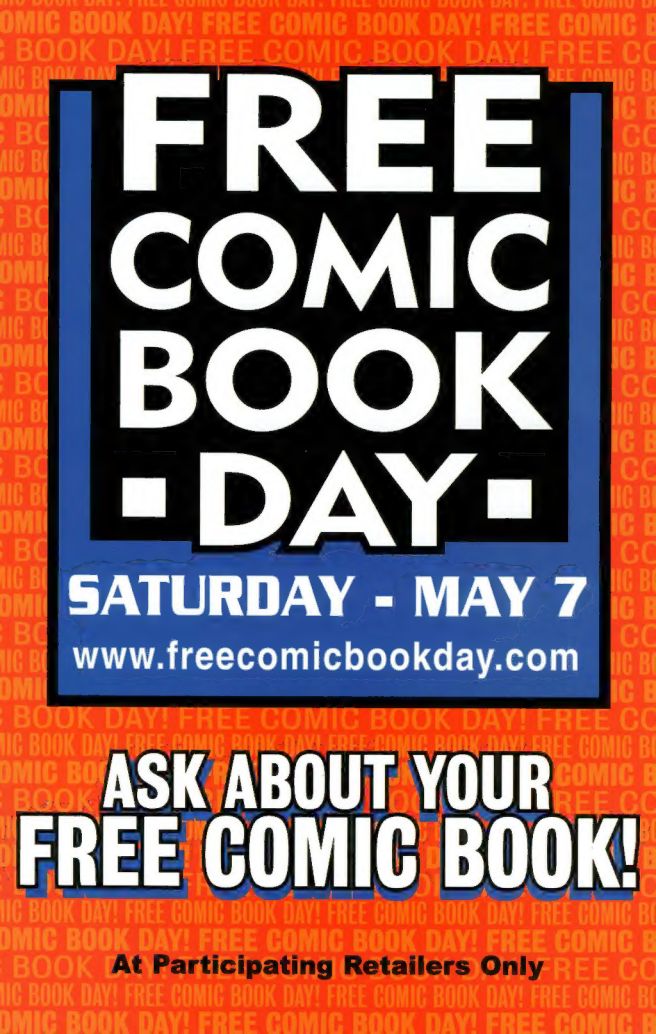
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